

Robert A. Abbott – A Voice for Black Americans

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Robert S. Abbott was born in Frederica, St. Simon's Island, Georgia on November 24, 1868, approximately three years after the Emancipation Proclamation. He seemed just like any other boy, but who knew that he would become a major black journalist. As an adult, Abbott attended Kent Law School in Chicago, Illinois and in 1905 started a major black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*.

Born to two former slaves, Thomas and Flora Abbott, Robert's childhood was very difficult after his father passed away, when he was only one. Afterwards, Robert and his mother traveled to Savannah to live with her family, since Flora was rejected by the Abbott family. However, the Abbott family tried adopting Robert, but his mother fought for him even though she knew it would be difficult raising a child by herself. Robert's mother needed to hire a lawyer who filed a restraining order against the Abbott family. Robert enjoyed his childhood in Savannah by attending church and going to school daily and he later took a job at a newspaper.

In 1886, at age eighteen, Robert applied and was accepted at Beach Institute in Savannah, Georgia. While there, he was often mocked for his color, so he persuaded his stepfather to send him to Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. However, within six months, Robert had made up his mind to learn a trade and applied to Hampton Institute in southern Virginia. While waiting for his acceptance, Robert worked as an apprentice for a newspaper, the *Savannah Echo*. Once at Hampton, he was again set

apart, facing more prejudice and discrimination, but eventually completed his studies and graduated in 1896.

At age twenty eight, Robert, still looking for a career, returned to his hometown and became a part-time printer for his stepfather's paper, the *Woodville Times*. In 1897 he enrolled in Kent Law School in Chicago, Illinois and in May 1899 he graduated, as the only black in his class, with a law degree. After many failed attempts at finding a job, he gave up on being an attorney and returned to Chicago.

Back in Chicago, Robert became a part-time printer. A former friend and black politician, Louis B. Anderson, asked a former printing house involved in city work to hire Robert. He began work immediately. By 1904, Robert received word that his stepfather passed away, and since his stepfather was a former educator, Robert and his sister opened a school in his memory, on the premises of Pilgrim Academy in Georgia. Eventually, Robert returned to Chicago and started a black newspaper, even though there were three other major black newspapers, owning his own paper would give Robert the opportunity to talk about discrimination and the mistreating of blacks. He would encourage blacks to move from the South to search for a better life in the North. Through his newspaper, Robert became a voice that gave hope to all blacks.

On May 5, 1905, the *Chicago Defender* hit the streets. Not having enough money to hire help, Robert alone printed, folded and handed out the papers going door to door. His landlady allowed Robert to use her dinning room as his office for the next fifteen years and it became his headquarters.

In 1906, in Brownsville, Texas, black troops were accused of killing two white men. Fighting broke out in the town and within days, the troops received a dishonorable

discharge from the army. Robert and the *Chicago Defender* covered this incident, which led to the selling of over 20,000 papers nationwide, with more than two-thirds being sold outside of Chicago.

In 1908, Robert took publishing to a new level where he started his own publishing house. Even though, he hired several men, it was still mainly a one-man job. In 1915 Robert enlarged the *Defender*, making it an eight-column and eight-full size page paper. On the front cover of the newest edition, he notified the public about the death of Booker T. Washington. Although the *Defender* was selling roughly 180,000 papers, the income from the *Defender* was low, since unlike most papers, Robert's depended on circulation and not on advertisements. In October 1929 Robert's magazine, *Abbott Monthly*, hit the streets. Although it came with the stock market crash of 1929, *Abbott's Monthly*, published by Robert, sold almost 50,000 copies. It was one of the first magazines published for black Americans.

Now a recognized public figure, Robert was honored and became president of the Hampton alumni. In 1918, Robert married Helen Thompson Morrison, a widow. Soon the Abbotts became patrons to the Chicago Opera and began entertaining. However, in 1933 the couple was divorced. Soon after the Depression, Robert began training John Herman Henry Sengstacke, his half-brother's son, to take over the business, even sending him to his alma mater, Hampton Institute.

Over the next three years, Robert became sick with tuberculosis, the same illness his birth father had died from. He had become so helpless that, by the time of his death, he was permanently bedridden. Robert died on February 29, 1940.

Robert S. Abbott was a business man and hard working citizen. His success came from responding to the needs of all black Americans. This man changed the perspective of blacks and led them to believe that they could do anything. [From Robert L. Johns, *Robert S. Abbott*, <<http://www.answers.com/topic/Robert-abbott#top>> (Jan. 8, 2008); Estell Kenneth, *Reference Library of Black America Volume IV*; Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*; Donald A. Ritchie, *American Journalists*; and Wilhelmena S. Robinson, *Historical Negro Biographies*.]